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THE FABER GALLERY

VAN GOGH

(Second Volume)

with an introduction by

T. W. EARP

and notes by

PHILIP JAMES

State Museum.
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THE
FABER GALLERY

General Editor
R. H. Wilenski

This second series of plates from pictures by Van Gogh follows the series already published in the Faber Gallery, and includes the additional plates printed in the double Van Gogh volume.

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THE FABER GALLERY

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FABER AND FABER

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Introduction by T. W. Earp

When Vincent van Gogh wrote to his devoted brother Theo, 'I live not for ourselves, but for the coming generation,' it was without the bitterness or self-illusion which might tempt other unsuccessful artists to take refuge in the same statement. He viewed his situation calmly, and with a clairvoyance endorsed by the event. For his work now appeals with special force to an age which, in its own disquiet, finds more sympathy with the man and more readily receives the affirmation of his art than did his contemporaries. We know better than they, thanks to the publication of his letters, how and why he painted; the intense subjectivity of his pictures is less startling since the conditions of their creation have been revealed. But above all, their originality and their departure from the line of European descent no longer count against them in a period sceptical of the authority of any exclusive tradition. Modern art has found material to adapt to its purposes more remote in time and place than the Japanese prints which so impressed van Gogh, while such movements as fauvism and expressionism, with their impulse towards spontaneity and emotion at the expense of established precedent, claim him as an ancestor for the very reasons which in his own day caused his isolation.

For beyond their having each passed through a phase of impressionism before taking their independent directions, there is less in common between Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh than the constant union of their names might imply. Post-impressionism was not a school in the sense of an association of painters with a common aim in art. There is no theory of post-impressionism, and as a movement it led its three pioneers on different ways. Cézanne, in the famous letter to his friend Bernard, wherein he reduced the forms of nature to the cylinder, the sphere and the cone, wrote, 'You will soon be turning your backs on painters like Gauguin and van Gogh.' And to the latter himself, he remarked, 'I tell you in all sincerity, you paint like a madman.' On the other hand, Gauguin insisted on his own distinction from van Gogh: 'Vincent and I,' he said, 'agree very little in general, and especially about painting. He admires Daudet, Daubigny, Ziem and the great Rousseau—all men I can't stand. On the contrary, he hates Ingres, Raphael and Degas—people I adore. He is a Romantic, and I am more inclined to remain a Primitive.' In essentials, the great post-impressionists, despite van Gogh's admiration for Cézanne and his friendship with Gauguin whose disastrous ending exposed their fundamental opposition, were as detached from each other as they were from the rest of their contemporaries.

Of the three, van Gogh was the most isolated: he is, indeed, one of art's loneliest figures. From the solitude of Provence and Tahiti, Cézanne and Gauguin could still draw from the past a protective authority for their endeavour. French culture and the European tradition in painting were resources on which they could rely for support in both the spirit and the process of their work, but which were lacking to van Gogh. In his final, most characteristic production, among painters using a basis of formal design and apart from the impressionists, none show fewer references to earlier masters. Self-taught, and late in making his art the supreme purpose of his life, he took as his first examples not the classics of the schools, but paintings of his own day—often inferior—with which he had become acquainted as a salesman in the firm of Goupil; or for drawing he found guidance from the graphic journalism of magazines and newspapers like the *Illustrated London News*. It is easy to exaggerate the part of Rembrandt in his Borinage pictures, when the reality itself was so Rembrandtesque; and in those days of his first serious attempt at a painter's career, instead of seeking what they might teach him from his great predecessors in the public galleries, he formed the project, unrealized owing to nervousness at the last moment, of asking Jules Breton, a popular disciple of Millet, to take him as a pupil. It was later, at The Hague and Amsterdam and at the Louvre, that he became well acquainted with the repertory of the past, of which the appreciations in his letters are all-embracing. Yet it was not a formative influence instilled and growing from the days of apprenticeship onwards, nor did it compose for him, as for his two fellow-pioneers of post-impressionism, a selected fund of reassurance for his own effort. The predilections which remained with enough intensity to tinge his own accomplishment were for Delacroix and Millet, who were not over-far from being his contemporaries.

Afterwards came the uneasy liaison with the impressionists and the discovery of Gauguin, with van Gogh again taking as guides, if not altogether as masters, the men of his own time, while in the suggestions for his work that he found in the Japanese colour print he was once more availing himself of material brought near to hand by a happy chance. There is, in the extent to which he built on the present, a sense of urgency, almost of improvisation, and he himself expressed it when he wrote, 'One must create quickly, quickly, in haste, like the reaper who in the blaze of the sun is silent and thinks of nothing but his work'. This determination, which is reflected in the dynamic quality of the pictures, is characteristic of a painter whose impulse has not been checked

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Plate 1. *The Potato Eaters.* See page 24

by the slow procedure of an academic training—another element of van Gogh's isolation, of whose results he was well aware, and which even gave him a certain satisfaction. For, referring to some trees modelled in thick pigment on one of his canvases, he wrote, 'In one way, I am content not to have *learnt* to paint. Perhaps I should have *learnt* to let effects of this kind pass unnoticed.' And from being self-taught he found a delight of discovery in his work, compared with the cut-and-dried sureness of the painters of the schools, which he angered his austere relative, Mauve, of professorial accomplishment, by formulating thus: 'I am an artist, and I assert that I am one because the word implies in itself the meaning, "Always to seek, without ever finding, perfection". It is just the opposite of, "I know it already. I have already found it".' One must remember, however, the distinction between self-taught and untaught, and that in his self-education as an artist van Gogh put himself to a hard school.

For he knew that painting meant something more than surrender to a delightful impulse; that the expression he sought from it demanded mastery of an arduous process which, he insisted, was as much a specialist's matter as it was to be a blacksmith or a doctor. So we find him setting himself as exacting a course of study as any art-master could impose; and if at first it had seemed as though chance or some kind of magic pulled a picture into correct recession and perspective, he was soon to be telling Theo, 'There are laws of proportion, of light and shade, of perspective, that one *must know* in order to draw. Without such knowledge, it is all a fruitless struggle, and nothing is brought to birth'. His work ended, instead of beginning, in simplification; he accumulated his science to enable him to shed it, and its shedding was to be as deliberate as its acquisition; but from his first resolve to devote himself to art, he accepted its difficulty and complication. His self-initiation into its practice, though the way might to some extent be made smoother by poring over Cassagne's *Guide to the A.B.C. of Drawing* or John's *Anatomical Sketches for the Use of Artists*, was

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as laborious as it was lonely. Though it brought relief of the spirit in one direction, it was not an end, but a change, of conflict.

Without the security of tradition to support him, and conscious that he must gain his technical equipment by unaided painful effort, van Gogh's adoption of a painter's career was indeed a perilous adventure. Again, in his motives for launching upon it, he was exceptional; for he sought from it not so much a livelihood—which it never gave him—as a justification for living. To his brother he wrote, 'O Theo, Theo, my lad, if only it would come about, if only the avalanche of depression at all the things I have undertaken and failed to achieve, the flood of reproaches I have heard and felt, if only it could all be removed from me and I could be given the opportunity and the strength to develop my powers and to persevere and to hold my own in that for which my father and I would fervently thank God!' Then, a little later, the solution had been found, and he could announce, 'I said to myself: I will take up my pencil again, I will go back to drawing—and since then everything has changed. Do not be afraid. If I can go on working, I shall rise again.' And after this declaration, made in 1880, when he was twenty-seven years old, he devoted himself altogether to painting.

Yet, in the making of the artist, his failure in other attempts at life had their share. His employment with Goupils', at The Hague, in London and in Paris, gave him an acquaintance with contemporary art and led to his taking up drawing with a certain amateur ability. But as important in his unorthodox preparation was the effort at evangelism among the miners of the Borinage. In that dark region of toil and poverty, he pursued his missionary service with an intensity which foreshadowed later mental collapse. By ill-afforded charity he brought himself near starvation, trying by every means to identify himself with the Borinage people in the hardship of their existence. But this endeavour in his own person to fulfil his religious ideals was discountenanced by his superiors. Dismissal followed, leaving him only with painting as a means to expressing his humanitarian sympathies and his tragic view of life. This Borinage experience drove his activity into its final direction and gave him the theme on which to exercise it.

In portraying the labourer's life, wearing itself away amid cheerless surroundings in a monotony of toil, Millet had preceded van Gogh, who knew his work well; but he had brought to his task a quality of primitive epic, a flowing line and serene clarity of colour. Van Gogh, in his early Dutch period, held to a bleaker realism, and something of his struggle with his medium adds to the harsh effect of his studies of the peasants and weavers of Brabant. It is the thing seen, with no added pictorial grace, which he is above all anxious to convey. Yet already these paintings have the odd, almost hallucinatory, power—the essentially individual imprint—which distinguishes his mature achievement. Something of this is due to the light with which he suffuses the gloom of his Brabant interiors and gives their figures its bold relief, as in *The Potato Eaters*, the most impressive work of his early phase. It is a subject which Millet might have chosen, though in the way in which it is carried out, van Gogh is nearer to Rembrandt. Yet even more than by artifice or mannerism, it is by the impression he conveys of his passionate absorption in his subject—of the emotional violence with which he realizes its pictorial elements—that the picture is so arresting. At the time, his intentions in painting were largely humanitarian, and reinforced by his reading of Hugo and Michelet; in *The Potato Eaters* he wanted to assert the nobility of manual labour, the difference of the peasant's life from that of civilized people and his moral superiority over them. He was, we find from his letters, avowedly a painter with a message, but at no time did the message obscure the clearness of his vision of the object in itself; and if the Brabant canvases sometimes betray an awkwardness of craftsmanship in over-emphasis of tone or monotony of colour, when he concentrates on a single theme of still-life—an open Bible or an old pair of boots—his painterly qualities are at once affirmed.

It is doubtful, however, whether a stranger to van Gogh's work, confronted with a canvas from the Brabant period and another from the Provençal, would recognize them as being both from the same hand, so great was the evolution that he underwent in the ten years of his painting life. His attitude to art changed as much as did the pictures themselves. The message became less important than the subject on its own account; he still poured his emotion into his work, but it was an aesthetic emotion, without sociological or moral implications. The toil-worn groups of miners and peasants and the dark interiors gave place to direct portraiture and to landscape, which took up more and more of his activity. 'I do not know,' he wrote, 'a better definition of the word Art than this: Art is *man* added to nature. Nature, reality, truth—but with a significance, a conception, a character, which the artist draws out and to which he gives expression, which he disengages, disentangles, releases, illuminates.' To recreate in art the essential character of his subject, without the intrusion of any extraneous, irrelevant matter, was henceforth to be van Gogh's aim. But to recognize what was essential and to register it when perceived—man's part in his definition—led far from the realistic imitation which was the basis of his Brabant phase. It even induced him to seek academic training; for with all the distinct promise of the early work, he was aware of its shortcomings, and in the five years following the decision to turn to art, he studied as well as painted finished pictures. His self-teaching was doubtless the most productive. He visited the national galleries of Belgium

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Plate 2. *The Drawbridge with Washerwomen.* See page 24

and Holland, slaved at human and animal anatomy, and found in everyday life his models for sketching.

During the stay in Antwerp and the two years in Paris which followed, the composition of his palette entirely changed from dark to light, a transformation to which his Paris contact with impressionism also contributed. For impressionism knows no darkness, being above all concerned with the exact rendering of effects of light, and van Gogh, always attracted by the immediate ambience, was soon engaged in the movement of the day.

Then, suddenly, in the winter of 1888, he departed for Arles. He felt discontent with Paris and impressionism alike. City life oppressed him: he needed nature and colour; and although he kept his admiration for the impressionist painters, the movement fell short of his own aims. He wished to create in colour, to which he attached a certain symbolism—while impressionism still confined its use to imitation. He sought also for 'the marriage of colour and form'—while with impressionism form was of secondary importance to the effect of light upon its surface. At Arles he found both strong colour and a remarkable clarity of natural form. It is, indeed, not always recognized how much the subject, the Provençal landscape itself, contributed to the achievement of Cézanne and van Gogh, in giving them a reality which corresponded with their aspirations. Van Gogh rendered it with a concentrated emotion whose expression in painting reaches the pronouncement of a mystic, and the breakdown of his reason gave still greater force to his art. Even at Auvers, when he wrote of his last picture, *Crows Flying across a Cornfield*, 'I did not need to go out of my way to try to express sadness and the extreme of loneliness,' one is aware that the same force is present in the work as that which Rimbaud invoked when he wrote—

'Est-ce en ces nuits sans fond que tu dors et t'exiles,
Million d'oiseaux d'or, ô future Vigueur?'

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Plate 3

THE ARTIST AT HIS EASEL

Paris, Winter 1888

V. W. van Gogh Collection

25½ in. by 19¾ in.

During the winter of 1887 van Gogh painted many portraits including this, perhaps the best known of all the self-portraits of which he did more than 20 during his stay in Paris. The characteristic combination of the reddish-orange hair with the complementary blue of the suit recalls Mr. A. W. Hartrick's pen and water-colour sketch of the artist made when they were both studying in the atelier Cormon and inscribed 'A memory of Vincent van Gogh looking over his shoulder and hissing through his teeth "bleu-orange".'

It was in this art school run by François Cormon (Salon painter of military and other 'subject' pictures) that van Gogh also met Toulouse-Lautrec who complained that Cormon was too indulgent a teacher. Van Gogh deeply admired some of Lautrec's work and Lautrec, as Wilenski relates in his *Modern French Painters*, returned the compliment in 1890 by challenging a Belgian artist to a duel because he spoke offensively of van Gogh's paintings. P. J.

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Plate 4

OLEANDERS

Arles, August–September 1888

U.S.A. Private Collection. Formerly London: Mrs Workman's Collection

During his first summer in Paris van Gogh did a remarkable series of flower-pieces through which he was feeling his way towards a more whole-hearted impressionist style. 'He paints chiefly flowers,' Theo wrote to his mother, 'especially to make the colours for his next pictures brighter and clearer.' When he reached Arles Vincent continued to do many flower-paintings, notably the great series of sunflowers on which he was working at the time he painted these oleanders. But now he had passed through impressionism to the fullness of his own style—'I am beginning more and more to try for a simple technique which is not perhaps impressionist.'

The oleanders were in full bloom at Arles and writing of another picture[1] he says: 'The row of bushes in the background are all oleanders, raving mad; the blasted things are flowering so riotously they may well get locomotor ataxia. They are loaded with fresh flowers and heaps of faded flowers as well, and their green is continually renewing itself in fresh, strong jets, apparently inexhaustibly.'[2]

Of the two books on the table one is again Zola's *La joie de vivre*, also seen in his early picture *Still-life with the Bible* (reproduced in Faber Gallery 'Van Gogh' I). Van Gogh's passion for literature, almost as great as his love of painting, is reflected in the frequent inclusion of his favourite books in his pictures.

P. J.

[1] *The Cedar Walk*

[2] Letter No. 541

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Plate 5

PORTRAIT OF A GIRL ON A PINK BACKGROUND

Arles, August 1888

Otterlo. Kröller-Müller Museum

19½ in. by 19¼ in.

To achieve merely a good likeness in a portrait is something very different from creating a life-like portrait. It requires more than an accurate perception of proportions to give the essence of the sitter. Only when there is a fusion of colour, form and drawing will the result come to life and convey that certainty—for which a visual knowledge of the model is not necessary—that the portrait is true.

Here as in his other portraits van Gogh arrives at the essential character of the sitter through the harmony of the ingredients without attempting a facile photographic likeness. The use of complementary colours is again dominant—the purplish blue strokes on the orange-brown of the blouse, the green of the flesh against the rose background which is itself patterned with green 'commas'. And here too one notices his use of a bounding line to express a fullness of form.

'I saw another very quiet and lovely thing the other day, a girl with a coffee-tinted skin if I remember rightly, ash-blond hair, grey eyes, a print bodice of pale rose under which you could see the breasts, shapely, firm and small. This against the emerald leaves of some fig trees. A woman as simple as the fields, every line of her virgin.

'It isn't altogether impossible that I shall get her to pose in the open air, . . . The girl's coffee-tinted complexion was darker than the rose of her bodice.'[1]

'Unfortunately I am afraid that the little Arlésienne will not turn up for the rest of the picture. As a matter of fact she asked me for all the money I had promised her for posing, in advance, last time she came, and as I made no objection to that, she has made off and I have not seen her again. But some day or other she is bound to come back; it would be rather too thick if she failed me altogether.'[2]

P. J.

[1] Letter No. 521

[2] Letter No. 529

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Plate 6

THE ARTIST'S BEDROOM AT ARLES

St. Rémy, September 1889

V. W. van Gogh Collection

28¼ in. by 35¼ in.

Van Gogh was obsessed with the idea of forming an association of artists in Arles, a communal school of southern impressionists, preferably under the leadership of Gauguin for whom he had a strong attachment. As soon as he acquired his own 'Yellow House' at Arles he intended it to be the focal point and the residence of Gauguin and himself. Gauguin, after a great deal of persuasion, eventually came on the twentieth of October, 1888. In the days immediately before his arrival Vincent painted a picture of his own bedroom. Then he made this copy, as he did of other canvases, when he was in the asylum at St. Rémy.

'This time it's just simply my bedroom, only here colour is to do everything, and giving by its simplification a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here of rest and sleep in general. In a word, to look at the picture ought to rest the brain or rather the imagination.

'The walls are pale violet. The ground is of red tiles. The wood of the bed and chairs is the yellow of fresh butter, the sheets and pillows very light greenish lemon. The coverlet scarlet. The window green. The toilet table orange, the basin blue. The doors lilac.

'And that is all—there is nothing in this room with closed shutters.

'The broad lines of the furniture again must express inviolable rest. Portraits on the walls, and a mirror and a towel and some clothes.

'The frame—as there is no white in the picture—will be white . . .

'I shall work at it again all day, but you see how simple the conception is. The shadows and the shadows thrown are suppressed, it is painted in free flat washes like the Japanese prints.'[1]

'I am working with a will in my room, it does me good and drives away, I think, these abnormal ideas.

'So I have gone over the canvas of my bedroom. That study is certainly one of the best—sooner or later it must be thoroughly recanvased. It was painted so quickly and has dried in such a way that the spirit evaporated at once, and so the painting is not at all firmly stuck to the canvas. That will be the case in other studies of mine too, which were painted very quickly and very thickly. Besides after some time this thin canvas perishes and cannot bear a lot of pâte.'[2]

P. J.

[1] Letter No. 554

[2] Letter No. 604

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Plate 7

THE VINEYARD

Arles, September 1888

Otterlo. Kröller-Müller Museum

27½ in. by 35½ in.

In this painting, done a month before Gauguin's arrival and destined for the decoration of the Yellow House, one sees the influence of Monticelli whom Vincent admired so much. He calls it 'a romantic landscape' and it is painted with great richness 'and in full pâte'. The influence of Japanese prints, too, is reflected in the figures with their umbrellas.

'Oh, my study of vineyards, I have worked like a slave over it, but I have got it, again a canvas of 30 square, and again for the decoration of the house . . .

'The "Vines" I have just painted are green, purple and yellow, with violet bunches and branches of black and orange.

'On the horizon are some grey willows, and the wine-press a long, long way off, with a red roof, and the lilac silhouette of the distant town.

'In the vineyard there are little figures of women with red parasols, and other little figures of the men working at the vintage with their cart.

'Above there is a blue sky, and a foreground of grey gravel. This is a companion picture to the garden with the clipped bush and the oleanders.'[1] P. J.

[1] Letter No. 544

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Plate 8

THE POSTMAN ROULIN

Arles, February–March 1889

Otterlo. Kröller-Müller Museum

24½ in. by 20¼ in.

Roulin was Vincent's one real friend in Arles.

'My friend the postman . . . lives a great deal in cafés and is certainly more or less of a drinker, and has been so all his life. But he is so much the reverse of a sot, he is so natural, so intelligent and he argues with such sweep in the style of Garibaldi . . .'

After the violent scene following the episode of the mutilated ear on December 23rd, 1888, he managed to get Vincent to his house. 'Roulin has been splendid to me, and I dare to think that he will remain a lasting friend.' The police took him to the hospital and when he was released it was Roulin again who was waiting to take him home.

There are six portraits of him and two drawings. The first sittings were in August 1888.

'I am now at work with another model, a postman in a blue uniform, trimmed with gold, a big bearded face, very like Socrates. A violent Republican like Tanguy. A man more interesting than most.'[1]

'Roulin, though he is not quite old enough to be like a father to me, has all the same a silent gravity and tenderness for me like what an old soldier might have for a young one. All the time—but without a word—a something which seems to say, we do not know what will happen to us tomorrow, but whatever it may be, think of me. And it does one good when it comes from a man who is neither embittered, nor sad, nor perfect, nor happy, nor always irreproachably right. But such a good soul and so wise and so full of feeling and so trustful.'[2]

Vincent also painted Roulin's wife (Plate 15) five times and his sons Armand, Camille, and Marcel the baby. One of the pictures of Madame Roulin, known as *La Berceuse*, is reproduced in Faber Gallery 'Van Gogh' I. P. J.

[1] Letter No. 516

[2] Letter No. 583

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Plate 9

GAUGUIN'S CHAIR

Arles, December 1888

V. W. van Gogh Collection

35½ in. by 28½ in.

The frequent inclusion of the artist's favourite books in his pictures has already been commented upon. Here again two novels lie on the chair. But this is not the only indication of Vincent's literary bias. In the choice of his subjects he often indirectly illustrates some inner conflict or reflects some problem. This view is admirably expressed by Carl Nordenfalk who, in his article 'Van Gogh and Literature',[1] suggests that this and the companion picture of the artist's own chair depict empty chairs thus foretelling 'the catastrophe which was destined before long to make them vacant'. 'Thus,' he continues, 'most of van Gogh's realistic motifs really represent private cryptograms, marked by a deep-seated instinct for literary creation.'

Van Gogh himself wrote, referring to the well known *Chair* in the Tate Gallery and to the picture reproduced herewith:

'Meanwhile, I can at all events tell you that the last two studies are odd enough, canvases of 30, wooden rush-bottomed chair all yellow on red tiles against a wall (daytime).

'Then Gauguin's armchair, red and green night effect, walls and floor red and green again. On the seat two novels and a candle, on thin canvas with thick pâte.'[2]

P. J.

[1] *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, *Vol. X*, pp. 132–147

[2] Letter No. 563

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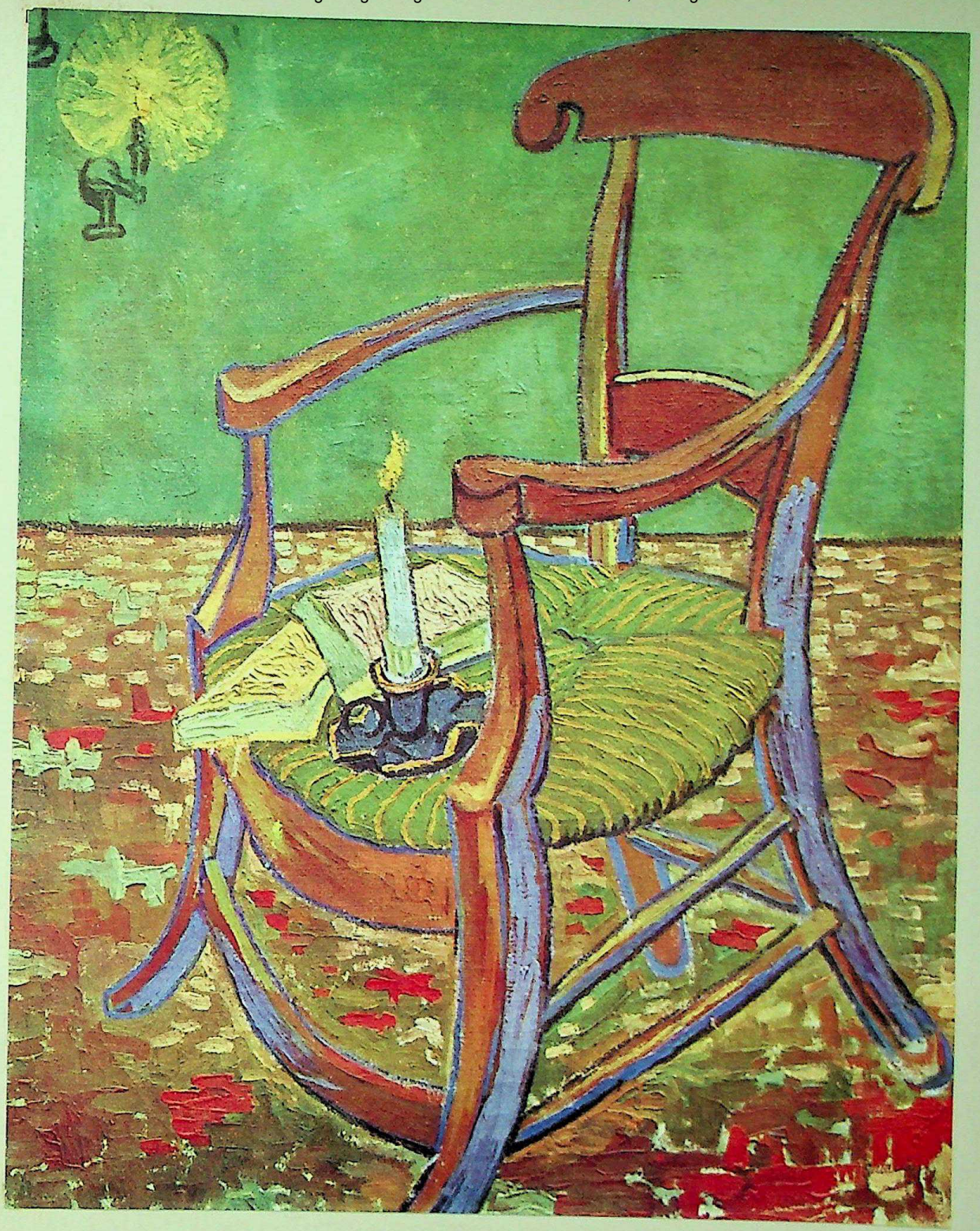

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Plate 10

THE ROAD WITH CYPRESSES

St. Rémy, May 1890

Otterlo. Kröller-Müller Museum

36 in. by 27⅝ in.

The cypress trees of the St. Rémy landscape with their surging spirals also became a theme to Vincent like the fruit trees. He intended to make a series of them too. 'The cypresses are always occupying my thoughts, I would like to make something of them like the canvases of the sunflowers, because it astonishes me that they have not yet been done as I see them. It is as beautiful in line and proportion as an Egyptian obelisk. And the green has a quality of such distinction. It is a splash of *black* in a sunny landscape, but it is one of the most interesting of the black notes, and the most difficult to strike exactly, that I can imagine.'[1]

In this picture as in the *Cypresses* at the Tate Gallery the whole canvas quivers with an upward motion reflecting his own inner agitation. A star and the moon are painted with those recurring circular brush strokes which are a practical expression of the sentiment contained in the famous passage: 'I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize.'

The following passage is from an unfinished letter written to Gauguin from Auvers and was found among his papers after his death:

'I have still from down there a cypress with a star, a last attempt—a night sky with a moon without radiance, the slender crescent barely emerging from the opaque shadow cast by the earth—a star with exaggerated brilliance, if you like, a soft brilliance of rose and green in the ultramarine sky across which are hurrying some clouds. Below a road bordered with tall yellow canes, behind these the blue *Basses Alpes*, an old inn with yellow lighted windows, and a very tall cypress, very upright, very sombre.

'On the road a yellow cart with a white horse in harness, and two late wayfarers. Very romantic, if you like, but Provence also I think.'[2] P. J.

[1] Letter No. 596

[2] Letter No. 643

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Plate 11

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

(after Delacroix)

St. Rémy, May 1890

Otterlo. Kröller-Müller Museum

28⅝ in. by 23⅜ in.

For several periods during his confinement in the asylum at St. Rémy, Vincent was kept indoors either by bad weather or his mental condition. He had no models and did not want 'to lose sight of the figure'. So he then began his series of copies from the graphic work of a strange assembly of romantic artists, notably Millet, Delacroix and Rembrandt. He wanted to have a collection of copies for himself and then to give them to a school. Like the 'echoes' of the veteran Sickert, also compositions taken from wood-engravings and book-illustrations, these copies are entirely free improvisations in colour done for the artist's own pleasure. Here, as in other pictures of the St. Rémy period, there is that 'gamut of violets and tender lilacs' which reflect his more sombre, depressed mood.

'Why it seems good to me to copy them I am going to try to tell you. We painters are always asked to *compose* of ourselves and *not to be only* compositors. So be it—but in music it is not like that—and if some person or other plays Beethoven he adds his personal interpretation. . . . Very good—and I, mostly because I am at present ill, I am trying to do something to console myself, for my own pleasure.

'I pose the black and white of Delacroix or Millet or something taken from them before me as a subject. And then I improvise colour on it, not, you understand, altogether as myself, but searching for memories of *their* pictures —but the memory, "the vague consonance of colours which are right in feeling at least"—that is my own interpretation.

'Heaps of people do not copy, heaps of others copy—I started it by chance and I find it teaches me things and above all it sometimes gives me consolation. And then my brush goes between my fingers as a bow would on the violin and absolutely for my pleasure.'[1]

P. J.

[1] Letter No. 607

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Note on Plate 1

THE POTATO EATERS

Nuenen, April 1885

V. W. van Gogh Collection

32 in. by 45 in.

This is the masterpiece of van Gogh's Dutch period. He made many studies for it, of heads, hands, and individual figures. Of the whole composition he did three versions, of which this is the best and last, and a lithograph. Sombre as the picture is, redolent of the dark earth, it glows with a latent fire. The underpainting of red and ochre, which brings light into this dark picture, doubtless reflects van Gogh's deep interest in Delacroix's theory of colour. He emphasizes rather than softens the ugliness of the peasants' features and the whole atmosphere is one of grinding poverty and unremitting toil. His own words are evidence enough of the importance which he attached to this culmination of six months' hard work:

'I have tried to make it clear how those people, eating their potatoes under the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labour, and how they have honestly earned their food.

'I have wanted to give the impression of quite a different way of living than that of us civilized people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or to admire it at once.'

P. J.

Note on Plate 2

THE DRAWBRIDGE WITH A GROUP OF WASHERWOMEN

Arles, March 1888

Otterlo. Kröller-Müller Museum

21¼ in. by 25¼ in.

This was painted for Tersteeg, the director of the firm of Goupil at the branch in The Hague where Vincent worked from 1869 to 1873. Theo tried to interest him in his brother's painting.

'Remains one thing not so easily settled, since Tersteeg has written you "Send me some Impressionists, but only those that you yourself think the best", and since you for your part sent a picture of mine in that consignment, I find myself in the not very easy position of having to *convince* Tersteeg that I am actually a genuine impressionist of the Petit Boulevard, and that I intend to remain so.

'Well, he shall have a picture of mine in his own collection. I have been turning it over these days and I have thought of an odd thing, not like what I generally do. It is the drawbridge with the little yellow cart and the group of women washing, a study in which the ground is bright orange, the grass bright green and the sky and water blue.'

P. J.

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